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Flawed Antidote For Nerve Gas Pushed by CIA

When architects make mistakes, they plant ivy; when the CIA commits a blunder, the agency stamps it top secret.

This is the story, uncovered by my associate Dale Van Atta, of a monumental goof the CIA covered up for 10 years.

It began with the Arab-Israeli Yom Kippur War of 1973. After a rocky start, the Israelis wound up with their usual pile of captured military paraphernalia, including what appeared to be Soviet chemical-warfare gear issued to the Egyptian Army.

Among the items the Israelis turned over to the CIA was an individual antidote kit carried on Egyptian armored personnel carriers for protection against nerve-gas attack. The CIA was delighted with this inside look at what it assumed was the Soviets' latest nerve-gas defense.

But CIA scientists also were mystified. When they broke down the contents of the hypodermic injectors, two of the chemicals turned out to be familiar antidotes: atropine and an oxime called TMB4.

But the third chemical was benactyzine, a known hallucinogen.

Did the Soviets know something we didn't? The CIA decided to find out.

It tested the antidote kit, named TAB from the initials of its three chemical components, on laboratory monkeys. The experiments were classified top secret and code-named "Grand Plot."

The CIA scientists pronounced TAB an unqualified success. That was enough for the Army. It threw out its old atropine antidote injectors and bought 7 million copies of the captured TAB kits.

Belatedly, the Army came to realize that the hallucinogenic quality of TAB unintentionally would make it the modern equivalent of World War I's laughing gas: a means of incapacitating troops long enough for the poison gas or other lethal weapons to cut them down.

Soldiers who injected themselves with the TAB antidote would be on a high, helpless "trip." The only advantage is that they would die happy.

It took five years to shake the Army's faith in the TAB injectors. Finally, on Nov. 4, 1980, the chief of staff quietly ordered the destruction of the injectors. The order explained:

"Chemical nerve agent antidote TAB . . . was issued during 1974-1975 as a replacement for atropine because it was thought to be the Soviet antidote for [a nerve gas]. Subsequent studies have indicated that TAB is incapacitating in itself, causes hallucinations and does not contain sufficient atropine to be effective."

How did the CIA scientists make such a blunder? It's not clear. Maybe the behavior of hallucinating monkeys is difficult to analyze.

How did the Soviets make such a mistake? They didn't. It was their Slavic brothers, the Bulgarians, who fouled up. Egyptian Maj. Gen. Esmat A. Ezz sheepishly confessed the truth in a conversation with Dr. Matthew Meselson, a Harvard professor and specialist in toxic chemicals.

According to the general, when the Soviet-made antidote kits expired in 1969—at a time when Egypt and the Kremlin were no longer bosom buddies—he bought new ones from Bulgaria, a notoriously unreliable weapons source. Through carelessness or incompetence, the Bulgarians put the hallucinogen in the antidote mix.

American scientists saw Cyrillic writing on the captured antidote kits and assumed they were Soviet-made. Apparently, they forgot that Bulgaria also uses the Cyrillic alphabet.

Luckily, the United States and its allies made it through the five years without having to use their fatally flawed injectors in a Soviet nerve-gas attack.

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